

## ENCOURAGING TO READ: A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION AND LITERARY COMPETENCE IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*The objective of this communication is to present an activity related to reading at university, in order to promote reading in students through various readings and the recommendation of them to colleagues. Several problems of our students (who have received literary training in their compulsory and post-compulsory studies and are, in theory, quite competent) appeared at the time of facing the reading of texts, both literary and academic. On the other hand, the activity provides us with a great deal of information about the expectations, the difficulties, the devices, the themes and the reading strategies used in everyday life and in the university studies. In conclusion, we highlight the positive reception of the proposal by students and the possibilities of completion in all university degrees. It is, in short, an academic practice that affects the integral formation of the individuals and the idea of lifelong learning, and that reaffirms us in the previous idea of the need to continue in some way to encourage reading and literary training in university students.*

### Key words

*Literary education; reading comprehension; reading groups; Higher education; educational proposals*

**JEL Classification:** M53, Z13, I25

### Introduction

The importance of reading in all educational levels and stages of life is a reality that almost no one questions, although we find differences in interpretation in terms of reading figures, on the causes and on the solutions to the low rates of the reading activity that are detected in our environment. In the case of university students, we often find an insufficient degree of readership and literary competence, associated with a lack of motivation for reading. To be able to face these deficiencies in relation to reading, we propose an academic practice related to:

- a) The integral formation of the individual
- b) Learning throughout life
- c) The need to continue in some way promoting the reading and literary training of university students
- d) Motivation
- e) The development of diverse competences related in each case to the degree itself (general competences, specific or typical of the subject to which the activity is linked to).

As the activity was developed, this included spontaneously, from the selection of the reading texts, the future profession of the students as a backbone: therefore, it was considered the possibility of extrapolating the activity to students of any university

degree, from a selection of titles related to each university degree, which is motivating for participants.

### 1. Reading and literary competence in university students

Josep Ballester (2007) quotes Bierwisch in the definition of literary competence as a specific human capacity that enables both the production of poetic structures and the understanding of their effects. It is not an innate capacity, but it is conditioned by sociolinguistic, historical, aesthetic and other factors; also, Ballester remembers Fish's idea according to which the literary competence is the result of the internalization of the literary discourse and its characteristics, assimilated by our experience as readers. From these approaches, the literary competence would be necessary for the personal development, regardless of the age and the profession of the individual. Ballester also considers that literary education, covering both formal education and leisure activities, includes ethical, aesthetical, cultural and linguistic dimensions.

In the current curricula, it is supposed that the students arrive at the University with a certain level of literary competence and reader habit, acquired during their compulsory Secondary Education; In many cases this supposition does not correspond at all with the reality, as many studies in Spanish and Slovak

university students show: these lacks would affect both academic and daily life and, of course, also the literary text (González Moreyra, 1998; Echevarría Martínez y Gastón Barrenetxea, 2002; Arrieta de Meza & Meza Cepeda, 2005; Delgadová & Oltra-Allbiach, 2016; Oltra, Delgadová & Pardo, 2017).

Thus, among the main conclusions of some of these studies the following elements were highlighted: the importance of initial literacy to prevent all types of problems at higher level (Svrchová, 2011), the need for a greater number of activities related to the language in our university students for the development of skills related to the reading comprehension and appropriate to the level of demand of the higher studies; the reiteration of the idea that the problem is not only for languages teachers, but also for the teaching staff as a whole; that the literacy-related difficulties found in the PISA tests continue persisting in higher education, and that this is the acquisition of crucial skills in today's information society, in which citizenship is required skills that can only be obtained when you have a higher level reading aptitude; therefore, higher education institutions should integrate the various text processing skills and the various strategies of literary and non-literary reading, as well as the linguistic disciplines in their programs in order to build the proficient reading skills in their students.

## 2. Reading activities at the University. Possibilities and limitations

In most universities there are activities related to reading and writing, which students can access in their free time. Authors such as Martos (2007), Ballester (2007) or Lluch (2013), among others, emphasize the value of this type of initiatives in the construction of the reading and literary competence of students, which should not be limited to the years of compulsory school, but cover the whole life of the individual and affect the academic results of university students, that is to say, this competence clearly improves their skills related to language and specifically to the written language.

It is a reality, as showed in the preceding paragraph, that a large number of university students presents serious problems in the competences related to the language, both oral and written: among others, we emphasize the difficulty to select and to prioritize the relevant information and the purpose of the author, besides the lack of reading habit in general. It is a problem detected a decade ago by a number of authors (Echevarría Martínez & Gastón Barrenetxea, 2002) and that should be taken into account when designing

any action that intends to influence the reading and literary competence of students.

There are a lot of initiatives carried out by the universities that try to go into detail about the skills related to the writing of the students: literary competitions, lectures, courses, commemorations, workshops, bookcrossing,... that in many cases are effective, but at other times do not reach the whole of the university students since they draw the attention especially of those more qualified or more sensitive to reading and Literature. Therefore, we propose to go to the classrooms to get a response from as many participants as possible.

## 3. Planning and development of the proposal

In the proposal that was carried out in the degree in Early Childhood Education, we started from the idea that we would treat the reading club from the university students' perspective (therefore, adults) and their own tastes and reading preferences. The only condition at the time of choosing the readings was that there was a thematic axis linked to the teaching, in the school or in the figure of the teachers in general. Another possibility would have been to provide a list of works grouped thematically so that each student chooses the one most adapted to their tastes; however, we believe that an activity of this type and with these recipients should be based on the greatest possible freedom when choosing a reading. The phases of the activity were the following:

1. Choice of reading by each student.
2. Work presentation and reading of a fragment to the classmates. A total of 15 minutes per session.
3. Session (outside the academic hours) from one of the readings which will have been chosen by the students among those that have been presented throughout the course.
4. Creation of a *wiki* with reading reviews and images, grouped according to different criteria (subjects, authors' nationality, public to which they are directed...) to create a collaborative work that can be used by the successive courses. This *wiki* will grow up and can be a reference to start the activity also by future groups of other university careers, on where to find the copies, comments from readers, etc.

Among the different advantages of this kind of actions, we find the information that the students provide us when selecting readings and, above all, explaining the reasons for the choice and the arguments for and against the chosen reading. As for the proposed plays, it is interesting to value the

motivations and the vision that students have of their own degree from the reading they have searched from their own preferences, in addition to enhancing the humanistic aspect and the habits of reading, the discussion and the use of the oral language in public that must be present in any university graduate.

#### 4. Students' opinion and new proposals

At the end of the course participants were provided with an eight items survey on the activity and its development, which in general obtained very positive responses. The survey helped us to detect the importance that students give to literary competence in the University and also to learn more about the difficulties they find when dealing with the written text (not only literary).

It is interesting also the fact that the activity helps us to know better what the students' expectations with respect to the profession for which they are prepared, how they conceive it and what is the professional profile they aspire to reproduce, all from the selection of plays that they will read and share throughout the activity.

As we explained above, the possibility of exporting this activity to other degrees became evident from the first sessions; this reading activity could be carried out outside the school hours, transversally among other subjects or linked to a specific subject of the curricula (always maintaining its voluntary character). In the following table we offer some possibilities of incorporation to various university degrees of the University of Valencia, transported through specific subjects and influencing the competences of the subject that can be worked through this proposal of reading promotion.

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We do not want to put aside at any time the limitation of the proposal, which in this case has to do with the lack of time available and with the fact of relying exclusively on the students' and teachers' willingness to be carried out. However, as we have indicated, it is an interesting possibility to deepen the literary competence of the students, necessary in the adult life of the literate people and that in many cases needs an obvious effort during the university studies.

#### Conclusions

As we said at the beginning, we intended, on the one hand, to carry out the exhibition of a classroom experience and, on the other hand, a proposal to be extended to other faculties, and which can be carried out practically from any subject (although it can be linked with preference, as it has been seen, in the humanistic or social art areas present in each degree). In short, it is a question of incorporating Literature into an area where it is practically left aside, if we make exception of the directly related degrees, such as Education or Philology, and to overcome literary education as necessary throughout life and the lack of motivating and meaningful proposals for university students in their closest environment and linked to the contents of each degree (independently of interesting initiatives already ordered and with a good follow-up from the public, like reading and creative writing workshops, competitions, etc). If we consider Literature and literary competence as necessary elements in the construction of intelligent and critical citizens, we will have to take advantage of any possibility that offers us the structure of the higher studies to facilitate the access from our students to literary works in a ludic and motivating perspective.

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